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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000190

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SUBJECT: S/P STAFFER INBODEN HCMC MEETINGS ON UBCV

REF: A) HCMC 15; B) 04 HCMC 1481

1. (SBU) In a meeting on February 22 with visiting S/P staffer William Inboden and ConGenOffs, Deputy Head of the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) Vo Ngoc Hue said the GVN was tolerant towards leaders of the outlawed United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), despite the UBCV taking actions that undermine "the prestige of the GVN." Hue said that the GVN allows UBCV leaders to practice in their pagodas without restriction. He claimed that the GVN would not deny UBCV Secretary General Thich Quang Do the opportunity to travel from HCMC to Binh Dinh province to visit UBCV patriarch Thich Huyen Quang, "were such a visit made on a religious and personal basis." However, the GVN would have to "consider carefully" any travel that Thich Quang Do made in his capacity as a UBCV leader. (Note: the UBCV announced via the International Buddhist Information Bureau in Paris that on February 16, police prevented Thich Quang Do and other UBCV leaders from traveling to Binh Dinh to visit Thich Huyen Quang. End Note.)

2. (SBU) Inboden stressed to Hue USG concerns that UBCV leaders are under effective "Pagoda arrest" based on unwritten charges against them. He urged that local authorities begin a dialogue with the UBCV and normalize the organization's status. If there are areas of dispute or violations of the law, they should be dealt with transparently and with due process.

3. (SBU) Inboden separately met with Thich Vien Dinh, a senior UBCV monk in the Giac Hoa pagoda in HCMC. Dinh told us that GVN suppression of the UBCV remains "severe." While UBCV members are not harassed in their pagodas, the police have all UBCV pagodas under 24-hour surveillance; Dinh termed this activity "psychological terrorism." Dinh said that he is allowed to travel within HCMC and can meet with other UBCV leaders inside the city. Travel outside HCMC is not possible. He said that police had prevented him and other senior UBCV leaders from leaving their pagodas to travel to Binh Dinh on February 15. Dinh said that in early February, before the Tet holidays, local police and government officials met with him to discourage UBCV travel to Binh Dinh.

4. (SBU) Dinh said the acolytes in the Giac Hoa pagoda technically are affiliated with the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS). However, he is still the registered head of the pagoda, despite his UBCV affiliation. Because of his UBCV membership, the pagoda receives no financial support from the GVN. The pagoda survives on donations from overseas Vietnamese, particularly from the U.S., Dinh said. He derided the GVN-recognized VBS as a tool of the Communist Party.

5. (SBU) Dinh echoed the strong anti-Communist stance of Thich Quang Do (reftels). He lambasted the Party for its corruption and said that one-party rule was impeding the social and economic development of Vietnam. He said that the Vietnamese people are opposed to communist rule and sympathize with the UBCV but are not allowed to express their true feelings. Dinh thanked the U.S. for its support of religious freedom in Vietnam and said that USG concern had prevented the GVN from "eradicating" the UBCV. Dinh stressed that the UBCV welcomed Vietnam's designation as a country of particular concern (CPC), but did not support sanctions that punished the Vietnamese people. He said that should the USG decide not to impose CPC sanctions, it should not take Vietnam off the CPC list immediately.

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